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Bürger's Lenore

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LENORE

BY

GOTTFRIED AUGUST BÜRGER

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

BY

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

ELLIS AND ELVEY
29, NEW BOND STREET
LONDON, W.
1900

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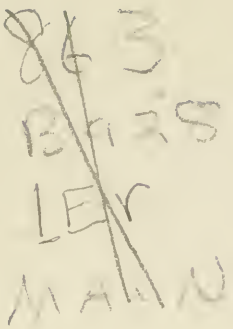

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Prefatory Note

THIS translation of Bürger's celebrated ballad was made by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in or about June 1844: he used at that date the signature "Gabriel Charles Rossetti." On May 12th of that year he had attained the age of sixteen. When he wrote it he supposed it to be a spirited and a good translation: I supposed the same, and continued to be extremely familiar with it for some years ensuing. After a certain space of time my brother neglected the performance, and it dropped entirely out of his thoughts. I heard no more of it, and probably never, after 1850 or some such date, set eyes upon any manuscript or any portion of it. No such manuscript was in my brother's possession at the date of his death, April 1882.

At last one of the few copies which in 1844 he made of the translation has turned up. It was included in a sale

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held by Messrs. Sotheby, Wilkinson, and Hodge, on November 26th, 1899, and was there bought by Mr. Gilbert I. Ellis. On its being shown to me, I adhered to the opinion of my boyhood—that it is a good rendering, far rather than a bad one. I think it perfectly worthy of publication.

This appears to be the first translation (of any sort of importance) that Dante Rossetti ever undertook. In 1842 he had begun the study of German under Dr. Adolf Heimann, of University College, London,—a most kind friend as well as excellent instructor. My brother learned the language pretty well, but not so as to have an absolute and ready mastery over it. No doubt Dr. Heimann must have coached him up to some extent when his juvenile ambition pointed to *Lenore*. Soon afterwards he translated the *Arme Heinrich* of Hartmann von Aue—published in 1886 (in his *Collected Works*) as *Henry the Leper*; and I need not scruple to say that he made a capital thing of it. In October 1845 he began a version of the *Nibelungenlied*. It has perished, much to my regret; but, after the unforeseen resuscitation

of *Lenore*, who knows but that the *Nibelungenlied* (only a few of the opening chaunts were translated) may also re-appear? It is rather noticeable that these first essays in verse-translation should all have been from the German—a language which Rossetti never knew thoroughly, which, after early youth was past, he did not in any way keep up, and which he may be said to have all but wholly forgotten in course of time. His translations from the Italian—which he knew very well, and from the most childish years—began probably in 1845, not earlier than the period when he ventured upon the *Nibelungenlied*.

In his preface to the volume *The Early Italian Poets* (1861) Dante Rossetti explained his general views as to what are the obligations incumbent upon a translator. They amount to this: that a translator ought to be faithful, but is not bound down to being literal; he is compelled to make various mutual concessions between meaning and rhythm or rhyme; and in especial he must not turn a good poem into a bad one. In his version of *Lenore* he has conformed very fairly to these rules. Literal it most certainly is not, but it

is moderately faithful. He allows himself (contrary to his original) the latitude of leaving lines 1 and 3 in each stanza unrhymed and of lengthening lines 7 and 8 from three feet to four. I myself regard this latter change as a decided improvement to the ear: but my opinion is not much to the point. The most salient modification, however, is in general tone. The *Lenore* of Bürger is, notwithstanding its startling and grisly theme, noticeably simple in treatment: Rossetti has largely reinforced it on the picturesque or romantic side. It may perhaps have been by mere inadvertence that he turns the religious atmosphere of the poem, which is manifestly Protestant, into Roman Catholic: thus, for instance, a "Vaterunser" becomes an "Ave Marie." But, if this was inadvertence, it testifies all the more strongly to the romantic impulse in his mind. In stanza 15 the translator is wrong in indicating that midnight is already past, for the clock afterwards strikes eleven; and in stanza 17 the ghostly bridegroom, in saying "zur Wette," only means "I wager you," and not "'Tis for a wager I bear thee away."

Without dwelling further upon details, I will quote here

stanza 27 of the German ballad, which the reader can compare with the translated stanza :—

"Wie flog, was rund der Mond beschien,
Wie flog es in die Ferne!
Wie flogen oben über hin
Der Himmel und die Sterne!
"Graut Liebchen auch! Der Mond scheint hell!
Hurrah! die Todten reiten schnell!
Graut Liebchen auch vor Todten?"
"'O weh! Lass ruhn die Todten!'"

So far as I am aware, the first English rendering of *Lenore* appeared in the *Monthly Magazine*, done by William Taylor of Norwich, and entitled *Ellenore*. It takes the literary form of a modern-antique, and throws the period of the ballad back from the Seven Years' War to crusading times. Next, Sir Walter Scott, in 1796, published a version anonymously. He borrowed from his predecessor (not from Bürger) the well-known lines—

"Tramp tramp along the land they rode,
Splash splash along the sea—"

(only substituting the word "along" for "across"). Considering that, according to Scott's and Taylor's translations,

the lovers are riding to Hungary, the second of these lines is just as reasonable as Shakespear's "Bohemia near the Sea"; for where does the sea come in any ride to Hungary? Scott's *William and Helen*, as he entitled it, can hardly be called a translation: it is a paraphrase, put into the ordinary English ballad-metre, and altering the period of the story in the same way that Taylor had done. Several passages here and there are however translated closely enough. This rendering by Scott—not any other rendering of the ballad—must have been highly familiar to Dante Rossetti several years before he undertook his own version. In 1796 a translation, *Leonora*, was published by W. R. Spencer, with engravings by Lady Diana Beauclerc. It is, I think, barely less faithful than Rossetti's version; the difference being that, while the latter exceeds in picturesque colouring, Spencer loads up the then accepted pomposities of "poetic diction." The metre is more distant than Rossetti's from the original; the rhyming being always alternate, and the lines always of four feet. On the whole it is a creditable performance. There are also translations by Pye,

the Poet Laureate, and by J. T. Stanley, nearly contemporaneous with Spencer's. The Laureate was not extremely faithful to his original in substance, and not at all in metre; and I think his version hardly as good as the average of others. Stanley might pass muster tolerably enough, were it not that he has stupidly added to the ballad a long tag of his own, turning the whole affair into a dream. The famous designer Retzsch made a series of outlines to *Lenore*, published at Leipsic in 1840, with the text in German, and likewise in an English rendering by F. Shoberl. Of all the translations that I have seen, this is the faithfullest. The metre is correctly followed, and the diction comes as close as one could demand. Many lines however are very poor, from a poetic or literary point of view. What could be more miserable than

"What ho! the dead can nimbly fly—"

instead of

"Hurrah! die Todten reiten schnell"?

As will be seen, all the translations of which I have as yet spoken were produced before that of Dante Rossetti. The following two are of later date. In 1847 Mrs. Julia

Margaret Cameron (the same lady, a valued friend of mine, who afterwards produced a considerable impression by her splendid pictorial-looking photographs) published an ornamental volume—her own rendering of *Lenore*, accompanied by steel-engravings after Maclise. Between the translation and the designs there is an odd discrepancy; for the former is correct to the date indicated by Bürger, whereas the latter are mediæval. Mrs. Cameron, in her preface, seems to suppose that her rendering is a strictly faithful one, but I can only say that she was mistaken: she does not stick close to the terms of her original, and she wholly discards its metre. In 1855 there was a translation by John Oxenford, a good German scholar: it is however rather an adaptation than a translation, being done to serve as the words for a cantata by G. A. Macfarren produced at a Birmingham Festival. There are yet other versions of *Lenore*, known to me little or not at all: the reader may perhaps opine that I have already mentioned quite enough.

Of all the translations with which I am acquainted, the best, I venture to think, is the one which Dante Rossetti wrote at the age of sixteen. I say it without hesitation,

but with a full consciousness that the critical opinion expressed by a brother carries very little weight. Some of the other renderings—as Taylor's, Scott's, and Stanley's—are put out of count by arbitrary alterations: the remaining ones are less animated, less poetical, and mostly less faithful, than Rossetti's. It may be as well to state here that, as the *Lenore* was the first translation of any importance that he produced, so also was it the first favourable example of his powers as a verse-writer. His original ballad-poem of *Sir Hugh the Heron*, written mostly at the age of twelve, was not indeed worse than one would expect from so boyish a hand, but no human being who knows the meaning of the word "good" can apply that epithet to *Sir Hugh the Heron*; and another shorter ballad, *William and Marie*, which he composed at the age of about fourteen, is even inferior to its precursor. This *William and Marie*, as it happens, was sold at the same auction-sale in which *Lenore* was included: it fetched a price decidedly more than proportionate to its poetic deservings.

In 1844, when Rossetti translated *Lenore*, this poetic invention was known to English readers as well as almost

any other foreign poem that could be named: I presume that it is a good deal less familiar to the present generation. I will therefore say a few words about the ballad and its author. Gottfried August Bürger, a very ill-starred specimen of the poetic race, was born on January 1st, 1748, son of a Lutheran minister, at Molmerswende in Halberstadt. He was fond of romantic solitude, and was anything but a strict moralist. His face is not an interesting one: fleshy, with round eyes, and, save the mouth, large features. A professorship at Göttingen, without fixed salary, formed his principal dependence. *Lenore*, published towards 1775, was the first poem of his to fix attention, which it effectually did; there was also the equally celebrated *Wild Huntsman*. Unlucky in most things, Bürger was specially unlucky in his marriages, three in number. Shortly after publishing *Lenore*, he married a Hanoverian lady named Leonhart, and then by his misdoing consigned her, as his spectral Wilhelm did Lenore, to an early grave. As soon as he was married to one Leonhart, he fell desperately in love with another, the younger sister whom he has celebrated under the name of Molly.

The wife, worn out with troubles and mortifications, died in 1784. Bürger forthwith espoused his Molly; but she also soon died, in 1786, in childbed. (This is rather a curious parallel to the case of the thrice-wedded poet of England, Milton, whose second wife also expired in childbed.) Bürger was still willing to try his chance in the matrimonial lottery. Before his choice had been fixed he received a letter from Stuttgart, written by a young lady in cultivated and feeling language. She professed enthusiasm for his poetry, and willingness to bestow her hand upon him. The poet, after making some inquiry, was only too eager to assent, and he brought home his third bride. But the result was a woful failure. The lady became faithless to her husband, made his life a torment, and, in less than three years, had to be divorced. Bürger did not survive this break-up for long. He was very poor, he was harassed by a bitter critique written by Schiller, and everything seemed to go wrong with him. In June 1794 he died, aged only forty-six.

WILLIAM M. ROSSETTI.

London,
December 1899.

The original Manuscript of the youthful translator has been strictly followed in the printing, as regards spelling, punctuation, etc.

BÜRGER'S "LENORE"

(FROM THE GERMAN)

BY

GABRIEL CHARLES ROSSETTI

(AGED 16)

BÜRGER'S "LENORE."

*** *I have retained the German version of the heroine's name; thinking it more suited to the metre than the lengthy English word "Leonora,"—and by far less unpleasing to the ear than the stunted and ugly abbreviation, "Leonor."*

G. C. R.

Up rose Lenore as the red morn wore,
From weary visions starting;
"Art faithless, William, or, William, art dead?
'Tis long since thy departing."
For he, with Frederick's men of might,
In fair Prague waged the uncertain fight;
Nor once had he writ in the hurry of war,
And sad was the true heart that sickened afar.

The Empress and the King,
With ceaseless quarrel tired,
At length relaxed the stubborn hate
Which rivalry inspired:
And the martial throng, with laugh and song,
Spoke of their homes as they rode along,
And clank, clank, clank! came every rank,
With the trumpet-sound that rose and sank.

And here and there and everywhere,
Along the swarming ways,
Went old man and boy, with the music of joy,
On the gallant bands to gaze;
And the young child shouted to spy the vaward,
And trembling and blushing the bride pressed forward:
But ah! for the sweet lips of Lenore
The kiss and the greeting are vanished and o'er.

From man to man all wildly she ran
With a swift and searching eye;
But she felt alone in the mighty mass,
As it crushed and crowded by:
On hurried the troop,—a gladsome group,—
And proudly the tall plumes wave and droop:
She tore her hair and she turned her round,
And madly she dashed her against the ground.

Her mother clasped her tenderly
With soothing words and mild:
"My child, may God look down on thee,—
God comfort thee, my child."
"Oh! mother, mother! gone is gone!
I reck no more how the world runs on:
What pity to me does God impart?
Woe, woe, woe! for my heavy heart!"

"Help, Heaven, help and favour her!
Child, utter an Ave Marie!
Wise and great are the doings of God;
He loves and pities thee."
"Out, mother, out, on the empty lie!
Doth he heed my despair,—doth he list to my cry?
What boots it now to hope or to pray?
The night is come,—there is no more day."

"Help, Heaven, help! who knows the Father
Knows surely that he loves his child:
The bread and the wine from the hand divine
Shall make thy tempered grief less wild."
"Oh! mother, dear mother! the wine and the bread
Will not soften the anguish that bows down my head;
For bread and for wine it will yet be as late
That his cold corpse creeps from the grim grave's gate."

"What if the traitor's false faith failed,
By sweet temptation tried,—
What if in distant Hungary
He clasp another bride?—
Despise the fickle fool, my girl,
Who hath ta'en the pebble and spurned the pearl:
While soul and body shall hold together
In his perjured heart shall be stormy weather."

"Oh! mother, mother! gone is gone,
And lost will still be lost!
Death, death is the goal of my weary soul,
Crushed and broken and crost.
Spark of my life! down, down to the tomb:
Die away in the night, die away in the gloom!
What pity to me does God impart?
Woe, woe, woe! for my heavy heart!"

"Help, Heaven, help, and heed her not,
For her sorrows are strong within ;
She knows not the words that her tongue repeats,—
Oh! count them not for sin!
Cease, cease, my child, thy wretchedness,
And think on the promised happiness ;
So shall thy mind's calm ecstasy
Be a hope and a home and a bridegroom to thee."

"My mother, what is happiness?
My mother, what is Hell?
With William is my happiness,—
Without him is my Hell!
Spark of my life! down, down to the tomb:
Die away in the night, die away in the gloom!
Earth and Heaven, and Heaven and earth,
Reft of William are nothing worth."

Thus grief racked and tore the breast of Lenore,
And was busy at her brain ;
Thus rose her cry to the Power on high,
To question and arraign :
Wringing her hands and beating her breast,—
Tossing and rocking without any rest ;—
Till from her light veil the moon shone thro',
And the stars leapt out on the darkling blue.

But hark to the clatter and the pat pat patter !
Of a horse's heavy hoof !
How the steel clanks and rings as the rider springs !
How the echo shouts aloof !
While slightly and lightly the gentle bell
Tingles and jingles softly and well ;
And low and clear through the door plank thin
Comes the voice without to the ear within :

"Holla! holla! unlock the gate;
Art waking, my bride, or sleeping?
Is thy heart still free and still faithful to me?
Art laughing, my bride, or weeping?"
"Oh! wearily, William, I've waited for you,—
Woefully watching the long day thro',—
With a great sorrow sorrowing
For the cruelty of your tarrying."

"Till the dead midnight we saddled not,—
I have journeyed far and fast—
And hither I come to carry thee back
Ere the darkness shall be past."
"Ah! rest thee within till the night's more calm;
Smooth shall thy couch be, and soft, and warm:
Hark to the winds, how they whistle and rush
Thro' the twisted twine of the hawthorn-bush."

"Thro' the hawthorn-bush let whistle and rush,—
Let whistle, child, let whistle!
Mark the flash fierce and high of my steed's bright eye,
And his proud crest's eager bristle.
Up, up and away! I must not stay:
Mount swiftly behind me! up, up and away!
An hundred miles must be ridden and sped
Ere we may lie down in the bridal-bed."

"What! ride an hundred miles to-night,
By thy mad fancies driven!
Dost hear the bell with its sullen swell,
As it rumbles out eleven?"
"Look forth! look forth! the moon shines bright:
We and the dead gallop fast thro' the night.
'Tis for a wager I bear thee away
To the nuptial couch ere break of day."

"Ah! where is the chamber, William dear,
And William, where is the bed?"
"Far, far from here: still, narrow, and cool;
Plank and bottom and lid."
"Hast room for me?"—"For me and thee;
Up, up to the saddle right speedily!
The wedding-guests are gathered and met,
And the door of the chamber is open set."

She busked her well, and into the selle
She sprang with nimble haste,—
And gently smiling, with a sweet beguiling,
Her white hands clasped his waist:—
And hurry, hurry! ring, ring, ring!
To and fro they sway and swing;
Snorting and snuffing they skim the ground,
And the sparks spurt up, and the stones run round.

Here to the right and there to the left
Flew fields of corn and clover,
And the bridges flashed by to the dazzled eye,
As rattling they thundered over.
"What ails my love? the moon shines bright:
Bravely the dead men ride through the night.
Is my love afraid of the quiet dead?"
"Ah! no;—let them sleep in their dusty bed!"

On the breeze cool and soft what tune floats aloft,
While the crows wheel overhead?—
Ding dong! ding dong! 'tis the sound, 'tis the song,—
"Room, room for the passing dead!"
Slowly the funeral-train drew near,
Bearing the coffin, bearing the bier;
And the chime of their chaunt was hissing and harsh,
Like the note of the bull-frog within the marsh.

"You bury your corpse at the dark midnight,
With hymns and bells and wailing;—
But I bring home my youthful wife
To a bride-feast's rich regaling.
Come, chorister, come with thy choral throng,
And solemnly sing me a marriage-song;
Come, friar, come,—let the blessing be spoken,
That the bride and the bridegroom's sweet rest be unbroken."

Died the dirge and vanished the bier:—
Obedient to his call,
Hard hard behind, with a rush like the wind,
Came the long steps' pattering fall:
And ever further! ring, ring, ring!
To and fro they sway and swing;
Snorting and snuffing they skim the ground,
And the sparks spurt up, and the stones run round.

How flew to the right, how flew to the left,
Trees, mountains in the race!
How to the left, and the right and the left,
Flew town and market-place!
"What ails my love? the moon shines bright:
Bravely the dead men ride thro' the night.
Is my love afraid of the quiet dead?"
"Ah! let them alone in their dusty bed!"

See, see, see! by the gallows-tree,
As they dance on the wheel's broad hoop,
Up and down, in the gleam of the moon
Half lost, an airy group:—
"Ho! ho! mad mob, come hither amain,
And join in the wake of my rushing train;—
Come, dance me a dance, ye dancers thin,
Ere the planks of the marriage-bed close us in."

And hush, hush, hush! the dreamy rout
Came close with a ghastly bustle,
Like the whirlwind in the hazel-bush,
When it makes the dry leaves rustle:
And faster, faster! ring, ring, ring!
To and fro they sway and swing;
Snorting and snuffing they skim the ground,
And the sparks spurt up, and the stones run round.

How flew the moon high overhead,
In the wild race madly driven!
In and out, how the stars danced about,
And reeled o'er the flashing heaven!
"What ails my love? the moon shines bright:
Bravely the dead men ride thro' the night.
Is my love afraid of the quiet dead?"
"Alas! let them sleep in their dusty bed."

"Horse, horse! meseems 'tis the cock's shrill note,
And the sand is well nigh spent;
Horse, horse, away! 'tis the break of day,—
'Tis the morning air's sweet scent.
Finished, finished is our ride:
Room, room for the bridegroom and the bride!
At last, at last, we have reached the spot,
For the speed of the dead man has slackened not!"

And swiftly up to an iron gate
With reins relaxed they went;
At the rider's touch the bolts flew back,
And the bars were broken and bent;
The doors were burst with a deafening knell,
And over the white graves they dashed pell mell:
The tombs around looked grassy and grim,
As they glimmered and glanced in the moonlight dim.

But see! but see! in an eyelid's beat,
Towhoo! a ghastly wonder!
The horseman's jerkin, piece by piece,
Dropped off like brittle tinder!
Fleshless and hairless, a naked skull,
The sight of his weird head was horrible;
The lifelike mask was there no more,
And a scythe and a sandglass the skeleton bore.

Loud snorted the horse as he plunged and reared,
And the sparks were scattered round:—
What man shall say if he vanished away,
Or sank in the gaping ground?
Groans from the earth and shrieks in the air!
Howling and wailing everywhere!
Half dead, half living, the soul of Lenore
Fought as it never had fought before.

The churchyard troop,—a ghostly group,—
Close round the dying girl ;
Out and in they hurry and spin
Through the dance's weary whirl :
" Patience, patience, when the heart is breaking ;
With thy God there is no question-making :
Of thy body thou art quit and free :
Heaven keep thy soul eternally !"

G. C. R.

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